

History by the Minute: A Representative National History or a Common Sense of the Majority?

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Abstract

A number of times over the past century, there have been struggles in the United States over what is and is not included in the history curriculum. These struggles have primarily been over who is represented in the teaching of history. In Canada, however, this debate has not been as prevalent. For example, Historica's Heritage Minutes is a national project that is designed to present Canadians with a common sense of national history and in the eight years since it was first introduced it has not received similar scrutiny. In this article, we use an emergent coding scheme to examine this project to investigate exactly whose history is being told and whether or not it is representative of Canadian society. We feel that while the Heritage Minutes are sometimes over representative of the dominant cultural traits in Canadian society, they do present a multicultural view of Canada.

In the United States, there has been a debate that has been raging over the nature of what history is taught in the classroom. This debate is a longstanding one, which has tended to peak around progressive curriculums such as Harold Rugg's *Man and His Changing Society*, Jerome Bruner's and Peter Dow's *Man: A Course of Study*, and more recently the National History Standards Project. Much of this debate is focused upon what is included. Those on the traditional side feel that history should tell the story of the making of a great nation and those who played a role in its development. Those from the more progressive camps feel that this is too narrow a vision of history, and feel that its only serves to exclude those not in the dominant group in society.

While there have been Canadian participants involved in this debate, such as Peter Seixas at the University of British Columbia, and J.L. Granatstein's whose 1998 book *Who Killed Canadian History* claimed traditional history was disappearing from Canadian schools, there has not been as much general participation in this discussion in Canada by academics, teachers, politicians and the general public, as there has been in the United States. Could it be

the fact that there has been little movement to establish national curriculum programs in the social studies? It is possible, although regional efforts such as the Western Canadian Protocol and Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation have not seen much debate around this issue. Could it be that Canada is simply more multicultural than the United States? Could it simply be that Canadians are more accepting of a multicultural history?

Over the past seven years many Canadians have been introduced and educated about significant moments or individuals in Canadian History through sixty second commercials known as Heritage Minutes. These Heritage Minutes represent one of the longest standing, national project designed to increase Canadians awareness of its own history. According to Lawlor (1999), their purpose was “to impart upon Canadians a common set of historical images and meanings upon which Canadians could construct a sense of national identity” (p. ii). In this article, we examine these Heritage Minutes based upon who is and is not included in these one minute history lessons to determine if they are reflective of a multicultural Canadian society.

Literature Review

The Heritage Minutes were first introduced to Canadians on March 31, 1991. They have been produced by the Charles R Bronfman Foundation, Canada Post, and Bell Canada; but are currently managed by the Historica Foundation of Canada through their *History by the Minute* project. There are available, free of charge, to Canadian networks and continued to be aired largely because federal regulators ruled that they can be included in the networks' Canadian content requirement. “The Heritage Minutes themselves have become part of Canadian culture, being frequently parodied. The high production values and entertaining but educating content has met general acclaim.” (Wikipedia 2006). They have also become one of the primary ways in which Canadians have become aware of the history of the country, particularly those who have completed their formal schooling. Shortly after their introduction, there were claims in the popular media that these Heritage Minutes had increased the percentage of Canadians who were aware of some of the specific events, such as the Halifax Explosion.

Canadian society is said to be more multicultural our neighbours to the south - at least in terms of official government policy. But this can also be seen in the socialization of people in both countries. Like many of the readers of this Canadian publication, as someone who completed their schooling in Canadian public schools I was well aware of the fact that Canada was considered a cultural mosaic, which (as it was described to me) was that it is primarily concerned with preserving the distinctions between the many cultures present in Canadian society. According to the *American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, the definition of multiculturalism is “the view that the various cultures in a society merit equal respect and scholarly interest” in (Unknown 2005). Yu (1992) stated the purpose of a multicultural education is to instruct students “to the idea that Canada is multicultural and that no one culture is superior or inferior to any other” (p. 65). This definition is consistent with the description of Canada’s cultural mosaic.

This is contrasted with the students that we have taught in our pre-service social studies education classes here in the southeastern United States, who all identify with the melting pot philosophy of multiculturalism or a view where those of other cultures are assimilated into American society at rates appropriate to those individual cultures. This belief that there is a dominant culture that one must eventually join — almost the very definition of a monocultural society. This may be why the struggle over whose history should be taught is so

strongly debated — because there are those who believe that the history of the nation is largely the history of the dominant culture. However, does this mean that because Canada is a nation where other cultures are elevated to the status of the dominant culture that the teaching of our history reflects this policy of multiculturalism? Does it also mean that a national project, such as Historica's Heritage Minutes, also reflects this multicultural view as it presents their “common set of historical images and meanings upon which Canadians could construct a sense of national identity”?

Research Methodology

At the outset of this research project, one of the two researchers was a Canadian and quite familiar with the Heritage Minutes and the history that was included in them. However, the other researcher was an American so the Minutes, and even much of the historical content contained in them, was new to this individual. It should also be noted that both of the researchers were former social studies classroom teachers, each with approximately five years of classroom experience. In order to develop a coding scheme for these Heritage Minutes, we independently reviewed ten random Minutes in order to create an emergent or open coding system (Glaser 1978). While this method of coding is most often associated with the constant comparative method and grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990), this was not the methodological framework that we utilized, only the method of coding.

After this process was completed, we came together to discuss the coding schemes that has emerged to determine what common ground existed and debated in areas where there were no similarities. In the end we established the following six different coding categories.

Table 1. Coding Categories

Gender	Linguistic	Race	Religion	Region	Type of History
Female	English	Aboriginal	Christian	Atlanta	Diplomatic
Male	French	Asian Black White	Jewish Spiritual	Canada North of 60 Ontario Quebec Western Canada	Economic Military Political Social

With the categories established, we reviewed each of the 66 Heritage Minutes contained on the latest DVD issued by Historica, along with an additional eight Minutes that were posted at the Historica website (see <http://www.historica.ca/minutes/>) but were not contained on the DVD (Historica Foundation of Canada 2006). Each Minute was independently coded and there was an inter-rater reliability of 88.27%. For the purposes of this manuscript, the “religion” category was not considered because only six of the seventy-four Minutes feature religion in any way.

The results were then analyzed based upon both historical and present-day demographic characteristics of Canadian society in table format. The first three columns of each table present the percentage of Heritage Minutes that each researcher felt focused on the specific category and than an average of the two. These three columns should add up to 100%, as they only represent the minutes where those characteristics were included. For example, if there

were 20 Heritage Minutes where religion could be determined and in 10 of those Minutes the religion was identified by the researchers as Christian, the average column would show that 50% of the Minutes coded for this category were Christian. The next column presents the overall average of total minutes coded with that identification. To follow the same example, given that there were 74 different Heritage Minutes, the 10 that were identified as focusing upon or including Christianity as the religion would represent 13.5% of the total minutes. The final two columns provide the percentage of the population that held those demographic characteristics according to the 1901 and 2001 censuses (Statistics Canada, 1901; 2001).

Results and Discussion

If the measure of a multicultural society is the elevation of other cultures to the same level as the dominant culture, then it is reasonable to expect that in a national history project that those groups that are in the minority would be overrepresented in comparison to their proportion of the population. To test this expectation, let's turn first to Table 2, which provides the racial profile of people represented in the Heritage Minutes.

Table 2. Racial analysis by percentage

Race	Researcher 1	Researcher 2	Average	Overall in Minutes	1901	2001
Aboriginal	13.41	15.88	14.38	15.54	2.38	3.29
Asian	1.21	2.56	1.88	2.03	0.44	8.87
Black	6.10	6.41	6.25	6.76	0.32	2.23
White	79.27	75.64	77.50	83.78	96.26	83.26

As it is illustrated above, from a historical perspective the three minority races which are the focus of some of the Heritage Minutes were all overrepresented, with the dominant race being historically underrepresented. In comparison to the present day data, both aborigines and Blacks are still overrepresented based upon their current proportion in the Canadian population. It is also worth noting that the overall average in the Minutes total is more than 100%, indicating in some of the Minutes focusing upon one of the minority races, the dominant race was also featured.

This focus or elevation of minority races is unusual in most history programs. For instance, in his award winning book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen (2005) described how the twelve American history textbooks he reviewed engaged in “hero-making”. Most of the “heroes” in these textbooks tended to be White males. This is consistent with Nash, Crabtree and Dunn (2000), who described the use of history as a tool to develop patriotism, usually based upon the “sugar-coated” stories about White, male leaders. However, the overrepresentation of at least these three minority groups in the Heritage Minutes is contrary to this trend and is indicative of the elevation of minority cultures that is described by our view of multiculturalism.

Unfortunately the race category is one of the only ones which over represents these minority groups. This is evidenced in the linguistic category presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Racial analysis by percentage

Language	Researcher 1	Researcher 2	Average	Overall	1901	2001

	1	2		in Minutes		
English	67.16	75.00	71.11	64.86	57.00	58.55
French	32.84	25.00	28.89	26.35	27.29	22.62

While the overall representation of the French linguistic group is appropriate based upon its proportion of the population, it does not represent an elevation to the same level as the English linguistic group — which is overrepresented based on its proportion of the population. This is similar to the gender category which is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Gender analysis by percentage

Gender	Researcher 1	Researcher 2	Average	Overall in Minutes	1901	2001
Female	22.39	29.33	73.94	70.95	48.78	50.48
Male	77.61	70.67	26.06	25.00	51.24	49.52

What is clearly illustrated in this table is that the percentage of Heritage Minutes where males are the focus is dramatically overrepresented, both historically and in the present.

This under representation of the minority gender is much more common in most history curriculums. In fact, in many instances where females are other minorities are infused into the history it is seen as an act of sympathy or political correctness (Appleby, Hart & Jacobs, 1994). One of the best examples of this was the massive backlash in the United States against the National History Standards Project (Symcox, 2002), when a curriculum that presented a diverse and multicultural view of American history was publicly condemned by the U.S. Senate.

In a country as large and geographically diverse as Canada, in addition to race, language and gender, geography is always of concern from the Quebec separation movement to Western alienation. Table 5 provides the geographic representation in the Heritage Minutes. It should be noted that the percents of the individual researchers are not included because there were no differences in their coding of this category.

Table 5. Geographic analysis by percentage

Geographic Region	Average	Overall in Minutes	1901 Census	2001 Census
Atlantic Canada	15.09	10.81	16.64	7.62
North of 60	1.89	1.35	0.88	0.30
Ontario	22.64	16.22	40.64	38.02
Quebec	35.85	25.68	30.70	24.12
Western Canada	24.53	17.57	11.14	29.93

Unlike the other categories, this category has probably seen the greatest change in the population for all of the categories. In considering this data, this becomes problematic

because of the dramatic change in the proportion of the population for each of the regions over the past one hundred years. For example, Atlantic Canada is historically under represented, but at present is overrepresented. Western Canada is historically overrepresented, but is currently underrepresented. Due to this shifting population it is difficult to determine if either of these two regions has or hasn't received its fair share. What is interesting to note is the significant under representation of the Province of Ontario. We see this as a positive sign, as in this category the Province of Ontario represents the dominant group.

The final analysis that was conducted, presented in Table 6, was unlike the previous four because it was based on the type of history that was presented by the Heritage Minute and not upon a particular demographic of the population.

Table 6. Type of history analysis by percentage

Type of history	Researcher 1	Researcher 2	Average	Overall in Minutes
Diplomatic	1.98	5.50	3.81	5.41
Economic	12.87	14.68	13.81	19.59
Military	15.84	15.60	15.71	22.30
Political	17.82	19.27	18.57	26.35
Social	51.49	44.95	48.10	68.24

What is most interesting about these results is the high percentage of Heritage Minutes that focused upon social history and the low number that focused upon issues of diplomatic, economic, military and political history. Social history is a way of looking at history from the bottom up, unlike the way that it is usually taught and discussed which is top down (Young, 1999). When history is seen from the view point of the bottom up, it tends to consider those individuals and groups of people who have traditionally been excluded from the “official” history because they are those who have not been in positions of power or authority. What is interesting about this finding is that most history curriculums tend to focus upon the diplomatic, economic, military and political history (Loewen, 2005). In these instances, social history is usually relegated to inserts and special boxes or insets (Symcox, 2002). Zinn (1994, 2005) would argue that the type of history being taught in history courses reflects the hegemony of the society. Students are asked to remember names, dates, and places of deeds done by the great men of history — who are usually part of the dominant culture. Zinn also concluded that the way history is taught allows for those who have power to keep it by ensuring that those who serve the upper-class do not get to ask questions of why certain decisions were made, how did that decision affect minorities and women, or any other question that would rock the status quo.

Conclusions

In this article we have presented a view that in a multicultural society cultures other than the dominant one should be elevated to the same status as the dominant culture. While the Heritage Minutes of the Historica Foundation of Canada do not quite go as far as given non-dominant groups equal representation, this national history initiative does provide an over represented view of many of the minority groups that we considered in our analysis, particularly when it came to race and geographic representation.

On the linguistic front, as a project representing a bilingual nation the Heritage Minutes did provide an appropriate representation of the French language in terms of the proportion of the population that claim it as their mother tongue. However, there was also an overrepresentation of English as a linguistic group. The most disappointing, but expected under representation was that of women in the gender category. While this is a common theme in most aspects of history, it is one that the Historica Foundation can work to address as they continue to produce more Heritage Minutes.

Finally, one of the most refreshing aspects of the Heritage Minutes was their focus upon social history. With the focus of most Canadian history textbooks and most of the learning objectives in Canadian history courses focused upon diplomatic, economic, military and political history, the focus on social history make the Heritage Minutes a strong compliment in any Canadian History classroom.

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